

THE EUGENICS REVIEW.

THE MERXPLAS BEGGAR COLONY.

AN EXPERIMENT IN APPLIED EUGENICS.

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In this country social problems have long occupied front places in the political arena, and measures for dealing with them must, of necessity, take the form of colossal bids for political support. It takes us by surprise to discover that only a few miles away in the country most like ours in the world, science, not party advantage has been given a chance. In 1891 Belgium was privileged to have as Minister of Justice, M. Jules Le Jeune, one of the outstanding sociologists of our time. He carried through Parliament the measure under which this famous institution has been administered down to the present day. His object was to disentangle some of the elements which when involved in the inextricable confusion of social life, make up the eternal and elusive problem of those who "Stand idle in the market place," who invariably account for themselves by saying "no man hath hired us" but who are so frequently "impossible" when sent to any kind of vineyard. He was convinced that measures for dealing with unemployment invariably shipwrecked upon the assumption that the people to be dealt with were persons ordinarily employed for wages, and ordinarily supporting themselves by their exertions and genuinely desirous of doing so. They were always exploited by people whose mode of life and ambition was the precise opposite of this, with the result that persons really answering to this description kept as far away as possible. Obviously if the unemployed person entered whole heartedly and unreservedly into the plans for his benefit the problem of dealing with him would be simple. Unfortunately as Sophocles pointed out, man has a number of ideas, often mutually destructive, in his head at once, and the least convenient ones frequently rise to the top. At the moment that a benevolent authority starts him on some kind of relief work, he suddenly becomes a conscientious and intensely scrupulous Trade Unionist, or a die-hard soldier in the class-war, or a valetudinarian, and the kindly scheme for giving him a chance of supporting himself by his own exertions "goes west."

M. Le Jeune was convinced that there were cruder elements in the compound than this and that "unemployed" was frequently a mask for the habitual tramp, beggar and thief and for the prostitute's bully. He believed that if the whole or most of this element could be elimin-

ated by a process of segregation, the genuine unemployed might be discovered and assisted. He believed in addition that many men were out of work not because there was a shortage of orders in their trade, but because they so frequently went drunk to work that no one would have them; and he believed that through syphilis, epilepsy and other troubles, men had lost their places in the labour market and sunk into undesirable modes of life in consequence. He conceived the idea of taking all these types out of the community for their own and the community's good. The idea was a Eugenic one from several points of view. The presence of such persons in society must lower the standard: owing to the part played by imitation they must be centres of anti-social contagion. Being totally unproductive their subsistence is a drain upon the resources of society and a drag upon its progress. They provided recruits for the forces of crime and disturbance. Besides eliminating them as sources of anti-social infection, he could compel them to live clean orderly lives, to abstain from vice, and even to produce the means of their own subsistence. While segregated they would not reproduce either their species, their diseases, or their vices.

Most of the arguments in favour of segregation were also arguments for permanent segregation, but the law carried by M. Le Jeune empowered a justice of the peace to commit persons who, he was satisfied, were incorrigible rogues, for a period of not more than seven or less than two years, to the *Dépôt de Mendicité* at Merxplas—*Ryckevorsel*, while the cost of maintaining him there was to fall as to $\frac{1}{3}$ on his commune $\frac{1}{3}$ on his province, $\frac{1}{3}$ on the state. Combined under the same administration with Merxplas were the neighbouring estates of Wortel and Hoogstraten, whither were to be sent or admitted at their own request, men with good records but unable through age or physical defects or misfortune, to maintain themselves in the open market. It was also believed that men sent to Merxplas might prove to be the victims of a mistake, when they might be transferred to one of the other "colonies." M. Le Jeune was well aware of the complicated nature of human personality. He left nothing undone which might make his segregation also a restoration. In addition to the *dépôts* under a milder regime which have just been mentioned, he provided that men at Merxplas might shorten their stay very largely by good behaviour, and that an after-care committee should be constantly at work endeavouring to replace them in ordinary life. Applications for liberation might be sent in at any time and would be fully gone into, while the Minister exercised wide discretionary powers in the matter.

Throughout the first decade of this century the great institution which M. Le Jeune had conceived was to be seen working at full swing. Merxplas is thirty miles out of Antwerp in a N.E. direction and is reached by a light railway which starts from the Turnhout Gate. The whole estate (including the three establishments mentioned) covers a little under 3,000 acres. Most of it has been reclaimed from the immense moor, which stretches away into Holland. The great expanse of sky gives a delightful feeling of openness. The impression is that of an estate very well cared for and very much up-to-date. Roads,

canals and fences are in first-rate order, avenues of young trees in all directions, large roomy well-designed modern red-brick buildings and electric light everywhere. There were buildings when Merxplas was taken over, but these have all been replaced by new ones, and much of the land has been reclaimed from the moor since 1891. The whole of this has been accomplished by the labour of incorrigible rogues who were also idle vagabonds.

By December 31st, 1891 the colonies contained 4,971 men; in 1899 the number was 5711 of whom 3908 were in the Dépôt de Mendicité. We will confine ourselves to the latter institution. The other two correspond roughly to Poor Law Institutions in this country. It is to Merxplas that we have no parallel. The population of Merxplas remained about 5,000 from 1900 to 1908, after which year figures have not been procurable till we come to 31st Dec., 1921, when it had fallen to 1405.

Of these 5,000, roughly speaking 3,000 were able-bodied. The Merxplas problem was (i) to organise for all these men a sane, active healthy, well-occupied, well-ordered life; (ii) to achieve that within the limits of the extremely economical budget allowed by the authorities. What makes Merxplas such an extraordinarily exhilarating subject is that these two purposes were amply achieved. To visit Hollesby Bay Farm Colony, Suffolk, England, and to visit Merxplas was a liberal education. In the former the pick of the London unemployed, who had applied to the Distress Committee for relief work, might be seen listlessly following a Suffolk labourer while he demonstrated his skill in growing tomatoes. In Merxplas the worst human material in western Europe might be seen marching out to their tasks or in to their meals like the companies of a first class regiment, or busily engaged at their desks or at any of the score of indoor manufactures. The sprightly engineer in charge of all the lighting, the sculptor at work upon a magnificent marble pulpit for a cathedral, the brickmaker on piecework slapping the wet clay into his mould for all he was worth, all seemed strange people to find at Merxplas! Enquiry elicited the melancholy fact that out of Merxplas they would one and all be picked up drunk, tattered and filthy in some gutter, or caught intimidating some poor woman on her doorstep.

At the time of the two visits paid to Merxplas by the present writer, in 1904 and 1908 respectively, M. Louis Stroobant was director. Besides being one of the foremost penologists in Europe, this charming man had a genius for business, for finance, and for inspiring and controlling men. Not only did he keep all these rogues clean and occupied, but he worked out the details in such a manner that the work done by the 3,000 able-bodied men *paid for their keep and supervision!* I spent a fortnight going every day to the Home Office in Brussels collecting data, and arrived at this conclusion. I showed my tabulations to M. Stroobant, and he assured me that I might take them as roughly correct. He had not worked them out for himself, because that was not his problem which was to maintain, occupy and supervise 5,000 men without exceeding his estimates. According to my calculations he got out of his able-bodied, produce and services equivalent to their

cost to the establishment*, and had their allowances available for the maintenance of his invalids and for the cost of improvements. The allowances had been cut to the finest point and yet he had built his fine set of buildings and effected his vast improvements out of income.

To keep his men busy and to eke out his expenses, M. Stroobant required to exercise great ingenuity. Large numbers of his "colonists" were perfectly useless out of doors, and through mental and physical disabilities greatly lacking in application and initiative indoors. He required a great variety of extremely simple tasks for them. To turn out anything saleable he required some machinery. The most useful proportion could have been worked out in time, but unfortunately "labour" protests against prison labour both in Belgium and England (his best market) compelled him frequently to give up a paying line of manufacture altogether, and start the process of adjusting his almost worthless labour force over again.

There were no prison walls at Merxplas. Escapes were frequent (919 in 1907). M. Stroobant regarded them as a safety valve. If a man escaped and found a job the purpose of sending him to Merxplas was held to have been achieved. The incompetent kind were generally back again in anything from one to four weeks. Although the minimum period of commitment was two years the average stay was only eighteen months, so constant was the effort to replace the men in industrial life. Unfortunately the success was very small. 50 men present in 1907 had served as long as seven years there in all. Of 4212 men sent to Merxplas in 1907 no less than 2412 had been there 4 times or more before. Only 515 were newcomers. It is customary to condemn punitive institutions out of hand if the figure of recidivism is high. Eugenists will not take that view of Merxplas. They will recognise the great service to Belgium rendered by M. Stroobant, however much the recidivism may depress him. On being asked whether he thought by more prolonged detention he could prevent these unhappy types from reproducing themselves, he gave it as his opinion that their offspring were very few. A high proportion had no wives. The wives of those who had any generally implored him to keep them and offered them no welcome when liberated. The kind of women willing to consort with them did not have children. The commonest history of their liberation was that when they had spent their leaving money and exhausted the generosity and liquor of their cronies they were soon sent back again.

The brisk life in the place was largely a result of clever management of the wages permitted under the act. All work was paid for. Two-thirds of the wages was banked for the man's leaving money. One-third he could spend at the canteen on additional food, light beer, tobacco and sundries.

*The figures for 1907 were: average of inmates 4716; payments by the authorities for their keep 1,664,400 fcs.; receipts for goods produced on the estate, 516,000 fcs., (2,180,000 fcs. in all): spent on the keep of the men, 636,000 fcs.; on wages paid to the men 319,000, with establishment, etc., total expenditure, 1,762,644 fcs. The showing was better in 1906 with 4935 men. Belgium was quit of nearly 5,000 of her worst specimens for something like £14 per head. In 1923—4 eleven thousand persons in jail cost this country £64 a head.

Here let me quote M. Stroobant himself:

"Est-ce dire que le pays doit être fier de posséder un si grand nombre de vagabonds. Certes non, mais il est à remarquer que, depuis l'application de la loi de 1891, le vagabond professionnel reste interné presque indéfiniment.

Il n'en est pas de même dans la plupart des autres pays d'Europe.

D'autre part, c'est une erreur de croire que le vagabond est amendable. On amende un criminel, un voleur, mais non pas un inférieur.

La plupart des internés de Merxplas peuvent être subdivisés en trois grandes catégories: (1e) les inférieurs physiques; (2e) les inférieurs moraux ou intellectuels; (3e) les chevaux de retour: anciens forçats, surveillés de police, souteneurs et autres récidivistes repoussés de la société.

Lorsque je les libère de dépôt, je ne donne pas aux manchots, mi-aveugles, goitreux, phthisiques, boiteux, scrofuleux, épileptiques et autre malheureux de la première catégorie le membre ou la santé qui leur manque. Aux simplots, mi-fous, dégénérés, imbéciles, irrésolus, exaltés, hébétés ou alcoolisés de la deuxième catégorie, je ne puis, hélas, donner l'intelligence, la décision, le jugement, la tempérance qui leur font défaut, et les misérables de la troisième catégorie sont plus que jamais repoussés par les leurs.

Les mêmes causes qui ont motivé un premier internement agissent peu après la libération et provoquent presque toujours les mêmes effets qui, dans l'espèce, sont le retour à Merxplas.

Le reclassement en masse des colons est donc une entreprise utopique et ce n'est qu'exceptionnellement que nous parvenons à opérer un sauvetage parmi le déchet social qui forme le fond de la population du dépôt. C'est ce qui explique, d'ailleurs, la faillite des méthodes coercitives appliquées de XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle.

Reconnaître l'infériorité des malheureux confiés à notre direction, c'est dire qu'il convient de les traiter avec humanité et commisération.*

Some notes were available as to endeavours to develop the religious sentiments of the men. A "mission" was conducted. The men seemed to listen well to the discourses but afterwards only 884 came to Easter communion. This was attributed by the senior chaplain to fear of the sneers of their unbelieving companions and in some degree to the menaces of anti-clerical members of the staff.

We have seen that the inmates of Merxplas had fallen to 1400 in 1921. This is attributed to reduced drinking, greater local effort to prevent vagabondage and the great demand for unskilled labour in restoring the devastated area. Merxplas is also to be the scene of a further application of penological science. By an Act of 1921 part of the estate is to be used as what we call a "Borstal" institution, parts as prisons respectively for convicted epileptics, tuberculous persons and mentally deficient persons. It would appear that this further classification of inmates will make possible the selection of individuals for whom any liberation whatever could be shown to be inadvisable.

Before turning from Merxplas to our own kindred problems it should be said that this slight sketch of the work done since 1891 by no

* Les Dépôts de Mendicité en Belgique par L. Stroobant.

means exhausts the lessons to be learned about the institutional treatment of vagabondage in Belgium. It began in 1543 with a decision of the Council of Trent; until 1772 the local vagabond was dealt with locally and to the present day apparently the communes are extremely unwilling to make disbursements except for their own vagabonds and for as few as possible of these. At this date the state opened two institutions, but as, soon after, imprisonment took the place of corporal punishment for ordinary offences the vagabonds were crowded out by offenders. Belgium then came under the power of France and a decree of 1791 making relief a national charge took effect there, but this was replaced by that of 1808 which inaugurated the present triple division between the commune department and the State. An institution as flourishing as modern Merxplas was built up by a certain Liévin Bauwens. In 1815 came the Dutch who substituted for "industry established by the State, agriculture furnished by private charity." In 1823 a group of philanthropists bought for this purpose the estate of Merxplas-Ryckevorsel. After the revolution of 1830 the new Belgian kingdom gave a subsidy to enable the work to continue, but in 1842 the liability was again placed on the local authorities and Merxplas was closed. After experiencing the great difficulty of classifying and occupying men in small local institutions the State again bought and reopened Merxplas in 1870. Authority was conferred upon magistrates (*juges de paix*) by the law of 1891 to send vagabonds to Merxplas for periods of not less than two or more than seven years. A feature of the measure was the heavy sentence magistrates were empowered to pass. These vicissitudes illustrate the difficulty of reaching finality in such matters, and the present changes following upon the great success of the law of 1891 carry the illustration further.

This country has been suffering from five years of lavish and almost unclassified relief. The admission of the able bodied to outdoor relief in 1921 submerged all categories in the flood of applicants. The resultant abuses have produced a call for action. The small determined and courageous group who, backed by "the great Duke," carried through the reform of 1834 have no successors. Between 1886 and 1911 the heart breaking experience of relief funds, of municipal relief works and poor law test undertakings gave rise to the demand for more science and more classification expressed in the report of the Poor Law Commission. The development of unemployment insurance has altered the situation. If its administration could be freed from political influence, it could undoubtedly be made a very fine instrument of classification. If there is any considerable truth in the contention that the volume of genuine unemployment follows closely the expansion and contraction of credit, and that this latter can be controlled by the Bank of England, it should be possible to carry the burden of unemployment by insurance and remove it from the sphere of relief. This would make feasible a scientific classification of applicants for relief. If the splendid work done for example for this society by Mr. Lidbetter were extended, the case for a measure of detention affecting certain types of applicant would become clear. The measure of success achieved at Merxplas in dealing with a type of parasite which is also a source of social contamination would form a happy precedent for a similar experiment in this country.